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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000415

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR AND SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/02/2019

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN/UZBEKISTAN BORDER: ON THE ROAD WITH
IRANIAN TRUCKERS

Classified By: DCM SYLVIA R. CURRAN. REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) More than 40,000 Iranian truckers travel to or through Turkmenistan each year, the majority passing in either direction through the Farap border crossing on the Uzbek border. As night falls, dozens of drivers congregate at cafes and parking lots, or on the side of the road on either side of the wobbly pontoon that connects the banks of the Amu Darya River and closes to truck traffic at 7 pm. Iran Watcher had occasion to speak to several of them during a visit to Farap on March 31.

"WHY DOES AMERICA HAVE A PROBLEM WITH IRAN?"

12. (C) One elderly rig operator from Teheran was parked just past the border crossing after carrying goods from Iran to Tajikistan and then stopping in Bukhara for a load of cotton on the way back. All of his children have emigrated from Iran, he said: Two sons left for the United States and reside in the Washington area; another two are in Canada, and two daughters reside in Europe. "Why," he said, "does America have a problem with Iran? We're good people -- Americans are good people. There are no problems between us." When asked about the presidential elections in June, he went on to predict "with 90% certainty", that Mir-Hussein Mousavi will prevail, and cited, in his view, the compatibility between Mousavi and President Obama as negotiating partners. He said that Iranians like Mousavi, whom they admire for his understanding of the economy and, during his tenure as Prime Minister, for protecting the country during the Iran-Iraq War. "Mousavi," he said, "is a reasonable person. He is well-educated, and thoughtful. He and Obama will understand each other." He called President Ahmadinejad, "a good man," but "a very poor diplomat." He said that he, "talks too harshly and, as a result, cannot help Iran improve its relations with the world. He just makes things worse."

ETHNIC TURKMEN SHARE THEIR VIEWS

13. (C) In the evening at a cafe favored by Iranian drivers, we met up with four ethnic Turkmen from the northern province of Golestan who had been on the road for two weeks carrying pre-fabricated houses to a Chinese construction site in Turkmenistan. Ramin, an affable, 40-year old member of the group and father of four from a village near Gorgan, said about the elections: "We don't plan to vote. We never do."

They (the authorities) don't care about us, so why should we care about the election?" He said that the Turkmen population and other members of Iran's Sunni minority are disenfranchised, noting that Turkmen children are forbidden to speak, much less study, the Turkmen language at school. He recounted an irregularity during the parliamentary elections in Iran last year when, he said, the authorities disqualified the Turkmen candidate for his district and replaced him with an ethnic Persian. People in the district even appealed to Grand Ayatollah Sistani to reinstate the candidate, he said, but to no avail. That experience, he said, has left Turkmen even more disillusioned than they already were.

¶4. (C) He said that Iran's Sunnis resent the religious and cultural domination of Iran's Shia government, and pointed out what he views as major cultural differences between the two groups: He said the Nowruz holiday is not particularly important to the Turkmen or other Sunni communities. Rather, for them, he said, Eid-el-Fitr (marking the end of Ramadan), and Kurban Bayram (end of the month of Hajj) have special significance. Consequently, neither he nor anyone else in the group was bothered at having spent the Nowruz holidays away from Iran and their families. Another member of the group, Taj-Mohamed, referred to Nowruz as a "Shia holiday." When Iran Watcher pointed out that its origins are Zoroastrian and pre-date Islam, he retorted, "Well, this government has made it into a Shia holiday." He added, "Turkmen men sometimes marry Persians," he said, "but we never allow them to marry our daughters." He said that Turkmen face discrimination in everything from holding public office to government jobs. In the diplomatic corps, he said, there are no ethnic Turkmen. "Not even in

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Central Asia, where we speak the same language. The only people they send here are Farsi speakers." He said that his uncle holds a doctorate in political science and applied to the MFA, but was passed over in favor of less qualified ethnic Persians.

¶5. (C) Another Turkmen driver, Naz-Mohamed, said that he hoped the U.S. will re-engage with Iran, and that the Iranian people are also very hopeful that they will. He said that the Iranian government, on the other hand, opposes it, because improved relations with U.S. and more contact between the U.S. and Iranian people could ultimately erode the regime's authority. He said he personally hoped that the U.S. and Iran will resume relations and the sanctions will end. "Economically," he said, "the sanctions make everything more expensive: If I need an American-made part for my truck, I have to buy it through Dubai, which doubles the price." He said with impatience, "When he was running for president, Obama said that, if elected, he would begin negotiations with Iran. So what is he waiting for?"

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The border area at Farap provides regular and constant opportunities to talk with a sector of Iran's population with whom U.S. diplomats normally have little contact: None had ever applied for a U.S. visa or had much contact with Americans, although several older members of the group fondly recalled the days when their country was "full of Americans". Everyone we encountered was very friendly, hospitable, and appeared comfortable talking openly, in contrast to locations such as the truck stop in Berzengi, near Ashgabat, where Turkmen police have a visible presence. We plan to check in periodically in Farap to canvass the views of this group of Iranians. END COMMENT.

MILES